

**POST-MODERNISM AND THE THEORY OF  
INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES:  
A REPLY TO NICHOLSON**

by

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The debate concerning the nature of interdisciplinary studies has been a central concern of the Association for Integrative Studies since its founding in 1979. In my paper "Five Arguments Against Interdisciplinary Studies" (1982:38-48), I attempted to sharpen the focus of the debate by identifying and briefly developing a number of especially prominent objections to interdisciplinary studies programs. The mood and purpose of my paper were heuristic. I hoped to stimulate critical responses that would provide a clearer understanding of the nature and worth of interdisciplinary studies. The gambit worked handsomely. In the ensuing years, a number of thoughtful papers have responded to the concerns I raised. Among the most provocative of these responses is Carol Nicholson's paper in the 1987 edition of *Issues in Integrative Studies* (pp. 19-34).

Nicholson argues that the debate surrounding my earlier paper is seriously flawed by its uncritical attachment to foundationalist epistemological assumptions. According to Nicholson, "Benson and his critics" subscribe to a discredited Cartesian concern for discovering the foundations of knowledge, more narrowly the foundations of interdisciplinary knowledge. She further charges that we are in search of "a unified methodology and universal agreement" in the conduct of interdisciplinary studies. In contrast to such outmoded assumptions, Nicholson commends a post-modernist approach that recognizes the rich diversity of interdisciplinary study and method. Rather than reducing interdisciplinarity to a single logical form, she urges a pluralistic approach that acknowledges, at best, family resemblances among the widely varying instances of interdisciplinary activity. A theory of

interdisciplinary studies should make clear what is presupposed by the practice of interdisciplinarity, Nicholson argues. It cannot be expected to provide a logical foundation for such activity.

The arguments Nicholson offers concerning post-modernism and interdisciplinary studies are much more interesting and, one might add, promising than her assessment of the view of "Benson and his critics." The latter group can be exonerated en bloc from her charge of Cartesian obsession. There is little in the papers associated with the debate that is incompatible with the general terms of post-modernist epistemology. Indeed, in my earlier papers, there is an evident openness to multiple approaches to interdisciplinary study, to interdisciplinary problems assuming a variety of logical forms. Further, the general direction of the debate is in line with Nicholson's concept of making theory as explicit as possible, rather than grounding our practices. The point of reference in the debate has been the rich variety of interdisciplinary activities. The theory we seek must do justice to the diversity of problems and methods. I underlined the importance of acknowledging this diversity in "The Devil's Due": "We owe it to ourselves to develop at least a general account of the method or family of methods that are characteristically interdisciplinary" (p. 33). What "Benson and his critics" have in mind is the development of a coherent theory, however complex in form, that will comprehend the distinctive character of interdisciplinary studies and illuminate the nature and varieties of interdisciplinarity both for its practitioners and for those who are ill-informed concerning its character and value. Ironically, Nicholson approves a parallel ambition held by post-modernist Kenneth A. Bruffee, who seeks to clarify the nature of the new epistemology by developing a "bibliographical guide that brings social constructionist texts together in one place, presents them as a coherent school of thought, and offers guidance to readers wending their way through unfamiliar territory" (1987:26).

If what "Benson and his critics" have offered is generally free of the foundationalist taint, it nonetheless remains to be seen whether Nicholson's arguments against our approach to the development of a theory of interdisciplinary studies are sound. Nicholson's attack on "Benson and his critics" challenges three assumptions that she finds "unquestioned by either side" in the debate:

- 1) The idea that there is only one valid theoretical approach to interdisciplinary studies,

- 2) the belief that unanimous agreement in the theory of interdisciplinary studies is a possible or even a desirable goal, and
- 3) the expectation that such a consensus on general principles and methods will provide interdisciplinary studies with a new legitimacy which is currently lacking (1987:21).

In the balance of this paper, I will review these assumptions, assessing both their accuracy as reflections of the views of "Benson and his critics" and their warrantability as beliefs about the nature of interdisciplinary studies.

There is little in the papers associated with the debate that corresponds to the first assumption, insofar as the "one valid theoretical approach" refers to a conviction that interdisciplinary inquiry can and must be reduced to some relatively narrow definition that neatly fits all instances of interdisciplinarity. Nicholson's allusion to Wittgenstein's treatment of games is helpful, but it should be recalled that Wittgenstein's point is not to condemn conceptual analysis, but to develop a more fruitful approach to understanding a large class of deceptively difficult notions. In the case at hand, our concern, then, is not with the discovery of a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for interdisciplinarity, but rather with the identification of those characteristics, the family resemblances, that recur in instances of interdisciplinarity.

If there is no one logical form that fits all the varieties of interdisciplinarity, it doesn't follow that there cannot be one valid theoretical approach to interdisciplinary studies. The theoretical approach commended, whether implicitly or directly, in my papers and the responses is one that does justice to the nuances and varieties of interdisciplinary studies. The theory we seek is to be judged, as noted earlier, by its responsiveness to the patterns of practice and by its comprehensiveness. The task before us in developing a theory of interdisciplinary studies is not unlike that of the post-modernist who would set forth the principal tenets and characteristics of the new epistemology, a project Nicholson assays with relative aplomb in her article. Nicholson's theory of post-modernism stands at approximately the same distance from the "world" as the ideal theory of interdisciplinarity contemplated in the debate papers. In each case, we have a theory about theories or patterns of inquiry, and common to both

meta-theories is the ambition to get things right, to attain at least a provisional validity. Perhaps the crucial logical distinction between the ideal theory of interdisciplinary studies and Nicholson's post-modern epistemology is that the former is a theory concerning some theories, while the latter is a theory about all theories.

The attempt to identify a single set of general principles that will reflect as well as guide the efforts of interdisciplinarians is doomed, according to Nicholson, by a rather obvious logical dilemma (pp. 21-22). The dilemma turns on the problem of finding a source for the interdisciplinary principles. If they are to come from one of the disciplines, then there will be a problem of justifying their authority and applicability in relationship to the other disciplines. Nicholson claims that the issue here is one of academic freedom, of recognizing "the limits of any one discipline's authority with respect to others." On the other hand, if the principles do not derive from a particular discipline, where do they come from and how do we justify them? Nicholson finds such an "adisciplinary" source as disagreeable as a disciplinary origin. The way out of the dilemma, she suggests, is to abandon the quest for such principles.

Whatever promise one may assign to the quest for a set of interdisciplinary principles, Nicholson's dilemma should not be credited as a significant problem. Upon inspection, neither horn of the dilemma appears to have much substance. Contrary to Nicholson's assumption, the interdisciplinary principles might well derive from a particular discipline without stirring up a problem of academic freedom. Principles drawn from mathematics, for example, play an authoritative role throughout the natural sciences; and principles rooted in the disciplines of psychology and sociology can have significant influence in literary and historical scholarship. The list of examples could be lengthened indefinitely. The source of the interdisciplinary principles we seek may well be found in the field of philosophy. Arthur Danto claims that philosophy is perhaps the only discipline that is within its own boundaries when it answers questions concerning its nature and methods (p. 2). Moreover, when other disciplines reflect on their nature and limits, they have moved into philosophical territory. When the historian asks "what is historical inquiry?" and "what are the ordinary and ideal methods of such inquiry?" he is asking philosophical questions--in this case, questions to be treated within the framework of the philosophy of history. A general theory of interdisciplinary studies will be, thus, a philosophical theory. It is comfortably within the domain of philosophical inquiry to examine the nature of the disciplines, their patterns of interrelationship, and the methods for integrating them. It is

not surprising that as the Association for Integrative Studies addresses the challenge of defining interdisciplinarity, it is the organization's "philosophical network" that has been at the heart of the debate. If a set of interdisciplinary principles is to be found, it may well be drawn, then, from what might be called the philosophy of interdisciplinarity. The set will include both second and third order principles that capture, albeit provisionally, the factors that are at work in the practice of interdisciplinary studies.

The second horn of Nicholson's dilemma is as unmenacing as the first. Nicholson's puzzling emphasis on the disciplines as the primary, if not the exclusive, source of theoretical principles leads her to reject summarily any thought of interdisciplinary principles having extra-disciplinary origins. It seems obvious, however, that many of the principles we deploy in everyday life, as well as in scholarly inquiry, cannot be neatly reduced to one discipline or another. It is this evident fact that makes the claims and barriers of the disciplines so disturbing. Although I think it is more promising to look for the interdisciplinary principles in the domain of philosophy, it is just possible, one might plausibly argue, that these principles can be found as general rules of thought or as simply interdisciplinary themselves.

Nicholson also objects to the second assumption--that it is possible and desirable for there to be unanimous agreement concerning a theory of interdisciplinary studies. Insofar as the participants in the debate seek broad agreement, it must be understood that the contemplated theory of interdisciplinary studies is no more than an ideal to be approximated. The notion of unanimity is well beyond the sights of the debaters. There is nothing doctrinaire or anti-critical in their ambition. Indeed, rigorous debate is earnestly sought in working toward a provisional consensus. Nicholson's related claim that there is an inconsistency between the quest for general agreement concerning a theory of interdisciplinarity and the values of interdisciplinary education rests upon a failure to distinguish between what might be called ways of understanding the world and an understanding of such ways. There is no internal contradiction in seeking general agreement concerning an understanding (or theory) of the complex and valuable interplay of diverse ways of understanding the world. Nicholson's objection here suggests the fallacy of composition: what is true of the parts must be true of the whole. The promotion and relishing of alternative perspectives concerning the world does not exclude the aim of developing broad agreement concerning the nature and value of such alternative perspectives.

Perhaps the most surprising of Nicholson's objections to the views of "Benson and his critics" is her challenge to the view that broad agreement on a theory of interdisciplinarity will confer a "new legitimacy" on interdisciplinary studies. Here again it is useful to note the parallel between the efforts Nicholson makes to articulate and to defend postmodernist epistemology and the efforts of "Benson and his critics" to articulate and to defend a theory of interdisciplinary studies. Nicholson's aim and that of other post-modernists is to define, however broadly, the nature and implications of the new epistemology. The value of such an effort is obvious; yet when "Benson and his critics" attempt such a broad definition of interdisciplinarity, Nicholson takes exception.

Nicholson observes that disagreements concerning theory and method among and within the disciplines are, in general, creative, stimulating growth and progress. She suggests that interdisciplinary studies should be no exception. Here again Nicholson misses the point of the debate. The primary goal of the effort to clarify the nature and methods of interdisciplinary studies is not to arbitrate among competing theoretical approaches and methods, but rather to illuminate the domain in which they occur. The concern is descriptive, not prescriptive. It is to articulate the range of reference for the term "interdisciplinary." This is a quite different matter from, say, attempting to vindicate a particular method or theoretical approach within a discipline. The concern is, in a broad sense, constitutive. We have a good sense of what psychology and historical studies and chemistry are--however fuzzy they may be around the edges and however dense the internal divisions concerning methods. We have far less clarity and agreement, however, regarding interdisciplinary studies. In seeking a "new legitimacy" for interdisciplinary studies, "Benson and his critics" are aiming primarily at a broad agreement concerning what we mean when we use the term "interdisciplinary." This is quite distinct from an ambition to establish a superdiscipline or an orthodoxy of interdisciplinarity. That such a general agreement should dispel various confusions and the appearance of insufficient rigor is, of course, a welcome dividend.

There is considerable power in Nicholson's metaphorical ideal of the intellectual city. She commends this image as helpful in understanding the post-modernist view of knowledge. Nicholson also suggests that the intellectual city is a useful analogy for understanding the character of interdisciplinary studies (pp. 31-32). The city, taken as a whole, embraces disparate structures and overlapping particulars. Its boundaries sprawl unevenly outward, here advancing, here receding. It is

protean, pluralistic, and quite varied in aspect, depending on one's coign of vantage. According to this analogy, the interdisciplinarian is both a builder and a member of the community, roaming freely across the neighborhood boundaries of discipline and department and freely participating in public debates with other citizens in a spirit of mutual respect and openness to new possibilities.

What does this analogy contribute to our understanding of the concerns raised by "Benson and his critics?" On balance, very little. The question remains, couched in the terms of the analogy, how and why does the citizen move from one neighborhood to another? Moreover, how are the neighborhoods constituted? The analogy of the intellectual city, with its emphasis on ambiguity and dynamic internal relations, reflects rather well what we already know about interdisciplinary studies. It fails to illuminate, however, the methods and patterns of interdisciplinary activity. What is needed is a theoretical elaboration of the complex field of activities that we call interdisciplinary studies. Ironically, such a theory may well turn out to require the same measures of historical perspective, definitional detail, and, one might say, vanguard *esprit* that Nicholson evinces in her exposition of post-modernist epistemology. Moreover, those seeking a theory of interdisciplinary studies should aim, perhaps, at no less breadth of agreement than that enjoyed by Nicholson and her fellow post-modernists. What Nicholson permits for postmodernist theory cannot be denied to a theory of interdisciplinary studies.

### **Bibliography**

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